

Teaching and Learning in the Midst of the Wisconsin Uprising

Summer 2011



Photo: Kate Lyman

By **Kate Lyman**

It all started when my daughter, also a Madison teacher, called me. "You have to get down to the union office. We need to call people to go to the rally at the Capitol." I told her I hadn't heard about the rally. "It's on Facebook," she responded impatiently. "That's how they did it in Egypt."

That Sunday rally in Capitol Square was just the first step in the massive protests against Gov. Scott Walker's infamous "budget repair bill." The Madison teachers' union declared a "work action" and that Wednesday, instead of going to school, we marched into the Capitol building, filling every nook and cranny. The excitement mounted day by day that week, as teachers from throughout the state were joined by students, parents, union and nonunion workers in the occupation and demonstrations.

four exhilarating days, four confusing days, four stressful and exhausting days. Madison teachers stayed out for four days. It was

When we returned to school the following week, I debated how to handle the days off. We had received a three-page email from our principal warning us to "remain politically neutral" as noted in the school board policy relating to controversial issues. We were to watch not only our words, but also our "tone and body language." If students wanted to talk about the rallies, we were to respond: "We are back in school to learn now."

That morning, as I watched the students file off the buses, I wondered about their responses to the Capitol protests. Since 70 percent of the students at our school come from low-income households, I guessed that most of the families would be supportive of fighting for teachers' and other workers' rights, and for public schools. I wasn't sure how informed they'd be about other aspects of the governor's proposals. I was fairly certain that most students had some knowledge, if only from the media, of what had happened on their days out.

A kindergartner confirmed my hypothesis when he marched off the bus shouting "Kill the bill!" In fact, some students had been at the protests with their parents; many had seen the demonstrations on the news; the others were wondering what the teachers were doing on their days off.

My class came in with questions and comments about the protests. They all wanted to speak at once. After morning greetings in the 10 languages that my 2nd- and 3rd-grade students speak, I asked them to raise their hands if they had a comment about the Capitol protests. Carlos said: "I don't like the governor. People born in Mexico—he'll take off their credit. He'll send them back to Mexico." Joshua, who loves math, said that there were 70,000 people at the place where the governor works. "Hey, Kate," he said enthusiastically, "you could make that into a math problem!" Kalia was proud that her mother and three older sisters were there with a Hmong contingent. She said, "Scott Walker dropped out of college, but he's cutting people's money." Carlos added that he knew that schools were closed because the governor was raising medical bills.

Kalia asked, "Why is the governor doing this?" Joshua said: "I think it's like segregation. They were protesting Jim Crow laws. Are people doing that?" Kalia made another connection to the Civil Rights Movement, which we had been studying. "It's a boycott, like the bus boycott, when the teachers didn't go to work and pretended to be sick." Two Hmong students had a conversation with each other: "Does the governor want to be rich?" "Yeah, he wants to be rich!" At that point the enthusiasm overrode the talking one at a time rule:

"He's selfish."

"He's crazy."

"He's guilty."

"He's greedy."

Kalia summed up the feelings of many students: "He should go to jail, even though he's governor."

At lunch, another teacher told me: "My students asked me what I did this weekend. I told them I read books. They wanted to talk about the protests, but I said, 'Now it's time to get back to work.'"

I recalled the principal's suggestion to say, "It's time to learn now." An important lesson of my 35 years of teaching experience has been that students are most ready to engage in learning when they are excited about a topic. Our morning discussion clearly led me to the conclusion that, if I cared about students' learning, I needed to address the rallies.

This wasn't the first time I had to stop and think about the school board's "controversial issues" policy. I have a warning in my personnel file that I am in jeopardy of being terminated if I continue to violate the policy, as I was accused of doing when my students wrote to the school board and assistant superintendent protesting the cancellation of a planned canoe outing. Thanks to the union, the accusation that I was using my position for "personal use, personal financial gain, or to promote any political candidate, party, or cause" was withdrawn.

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Photo: Joseph Blough
Wisconsin protesters at the state Capitol in Madison.

However, under the agreement we reached, the reprimand sits in my file in a sealed envelope labeled "Do not open." I thought back to my defense on that occasion. First, I was able to demonstrate that the activity was student initiated, sparked by a letter that one of my students had written at home and brought in to share. Second, I was able to highlight all the district standards that my students' letter writing had reinforced.

Consequently, I followed Joshua's idea and made up problems based on numbers from the rally. Joshua was proud to lend his name to the worksheet and pass it on to other teachers. The students who could handle story problems in the 1,000s worked on Joshua's problems, but others solved problems with smaller numbers.

'It's the Same Song!'

Then I decided to link our two-month study of the Civil Rights Movement to the Madison protests.

Many of our district social studies standards relate to the theme of "Time, Change, and Continuity." A new program, Thinking Like a Historian, trains teachers to use primary sources to relate historical events to those in other periods, including the present. Keeping the standards in mind, I sat down with my University of Wisconsin practicum student, Stephanie Hanson, to work out a lesson plan. I had seen Stephanie at the first Capitol protest, so I knew she would be interested in the challenge. We agreed to link the lesson to our unit on the Civil Rights Movement, since students were already making connections. Stephanie suggested making a PowerPoint juxtaposing photos from the Civil Rights Movement and the Madison protest. We brainstormed possible comparisons and contrasts, and many came to mind: the 1963 March on Washington and the enormous crowds gathered inside and outside the Madison Capitol; the use of nonviolent direct action, including sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and sleep-ins at the Capitol; the role of police officers (during the Civil Rights Movement, police at times protected but more often attacked protesters; in Madison police guarded but also, along with the firefighters, marched with the protesters). The list went on. Even after leaving school, I found myself calling or emailing Stephanie with yet another parallel.

Stephanie put together a moving PowerPoint. When she presented it to the students on Friday, one high point was hearing people sing "We Shall Overcome" at the March on Washington and then hearing crowds of people in the Capitol singing. "It's the same song!" shouted several students. A spontaneous chorus of voices from our classroom joined in the song. We asked the students why singing was so important to both movements. What were the protesters communicating through the songs? Many ideas were offered, concluded by Malik's insight: "They're thinking, 'No matter how tough this is, we will stand together and do what is right.'"

A photo of teens marching during the Birmingham Children's March was paired with a photo of Madison's East High School students—close to a 1,000 of whom staged a walkout the first day of the rallies. "That's my sister!" shouted Kalia. "And that's my sister," echoed Henry. Tamika yelled out, "My sister's there, too, and some people I know from the Salvation Army." As the students viewed the PowerPoint, I charted their answers to Stephanie's prompts:

Who are the protesters?
What do they want?
What are ways they protest?
What is the role of the police and firefighters?
Who is on the other side?

I hesitated to ask this last question as the students were examining a photo of white segregationists ("We want a white school!") juxtaposed to a Walker supporter ("WisSCOTTsin"). But we talked extensively about rights, in the context of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Capitol protests. Students were able to articulate that the white demonstrators wanted segregation. They didn't want black people to have rights. The students connected the Walker supporter to someone who also didn't care about people getting their rights—the money, education, or health care they needed.

The students were thoroughly engaged throughout the slide show, and their comments displayed not only interest in the current situation, but also knowledge of events and concepts learned during our study of the Civil Rights Movement.

We followed the slide show with an individual writing activity. We asked students to choose a photo either from the Civil Rights Movement or the Capitol protests and to imagine themselves as a participant. They wrote using the following prompt:

I see . . .
I hear . . .
I feel . . .
I wonder . . .
I hope . . .

After another day finishing their reflections on the photos, we moved on to other projects. However, the Madison rallies continued to play a part in many things we did. Especially after the massive weekend rallies, students reported on what they had seen in person or on television. Tamika was especially impressed by the free food that had been donated to the protesters by people from all over the world. Teachers and students continued to make and solve math problems about the rallies on the square. When students wrote time travel stories about the Civil Rights Movement, some started their story at the Capitol protest.

Got an idea? For curriculum and in-school articles, contact Bill Bigelow, curriculum editor:

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'Vote Today!'

Normally the spring election doesn't attract a lot of attention, and in the past I usually only taught about voting and elections during the November election period. However, this year the April 5 election included voting for a state Supreme Court justice who would rule on Walker's agenda. So it struck me as the perfect time to continue our examination of how people can use their democratic rights to fight for their rights. A few months earlier, when we learned about 8-year-old Sheyann Webb and the many others who bravely marched from Selma to Montgomery to get voting rights for African Americans, I felt that few students understood why black people wanted to vote. Learning about elections was an opportunity for students to realize that voting, along with all the types of protests that we had explored, is a way to fight for a more just society.

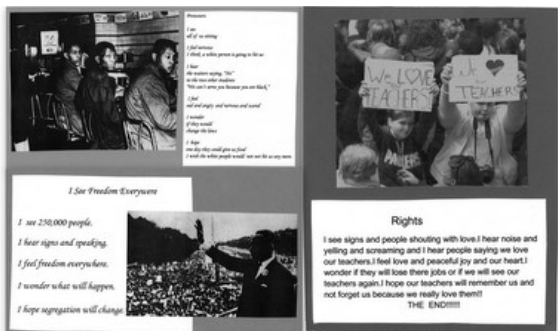
I started by asking students what they already knew about elections. They did know that the governor, mayor, and president were elected, but weren't sure who was in charge of what. They knew that you had to be 18 to vote. They weren't sure about the process of voting beyond classroom votes we had taken for the guinea pigs' names. They needed to be introduced to a lot of new vocabulary, including *candidate*, *ballot*, *polling place*, and *running for office*.

I played a song, "Voting Is Your Responsibility," which has a catchy beat and tune, and raises issues about why children need the adults in their lives to vote "for them." Then I asked students to work in small groups to list reasons why people should vote. They came up with many good reasons:

They have to vote to decide who's in charge, to have better schools, to help people and to raise money.

A reason why people should vote is to have a better place to live in.

Vote in case you have bad laws. You want to pick the right person so they can make good laws and so they can give people money, food, drink, clothes, shoes, restaurants, exercise, take showers, and wash their hands.



Courtesy Kate Lyman [click to enlarge](#)

Students imagine themselves in photos of the Madison rallies and the Civil Rights Movement.

In part thanks to Gov. Walker's "budget repair bill," students' comments reflected a better understanding than in previous years that it is the people we elect who make the laws that affect low-income people—laws about taxes and wages, health care, immigration, and education.

I knew I needed to address the issue of citizenship as a qualification to vote. All but two of my families were first-generation immigrants. Several, including but not limited to undocumented newcomers, weren't able to vote. The previous year I had taught a unit about the history of voting rights, including people who even today continue to be excluded from voting. Learning about the historical struggle for all groups (with the exception of white men with property) helped put students' own families' relationship to citizenship or voting in context. I explained the

difficulties and contradictions in becoming a U.S. citizen. I also invited our Hmong bilingual resource specialist to speak about what she had to do to obtain U.S. citizenship. The students were fascinated, and had many questions and connections to their family members' experiences.

The day before the elections, we made big banners encouraging people to vote. The students decided on their own to make signs in English, Spanish, and Hmong. On Election Day we took a field trip to the local polling place to see voting in action. On the way we stopped on a busy street to hold the multilingual banners reminding people to vote. Students were thrilled when cars honked back at them. One driver even beeped her horn to the rhythm of a frequently repeated chant at the Capitol rallies: "This is what democracy looks like."

Back in the classroom, we had a mock election with sample ballots from the county clerk's office. Students learned how to register (they had to know their address) and mark the ballots. They took turns being in charge of registration, giving out ballots, and voting. We tallied our ballots and then, the next day, compared our results with the official results.

Our mock election had its payoff a few days later when a school board member, Marjorie Passman, stopped by my classroom on her way to a school performance. After my quick introduction, Tamika jumped up and hugged her. "I voted for you!" she shouted. Marj looked down at the 3rd grader, pleased but perplexed. I, too, was confused until I realized that Tamika had remembered Marj's name from the ballot. Another student made the connection and showed Marj the sample ballot that I had taped on the board. At that point other students joined in an enthusiastic welcome. Marj apologized for interrupting, but I assured her that she had helped the election come alive for my class.

I thought about the impact in my classroom of the Capitol protests. We made connections with the Civil Rights Movement, deepening student understanding of who protests, and how and why they protest. We linked the protests to the election and asked important questions: Who votes? Who are the candidates? What are the issues? Why is it important to vote? Marches, rallies, boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, and elections were no longer foreign words to them. They were all part of how people have struggled for their rights in the past and continue to do so. And we were there on Election Day, standing out in the cold, displaying banners—Vote Today!—in English, Spanish, and Hmong.

Yes, I thought, this is what democracy looks like. And this is what learning looks like.

Resource

Sanders, Rose. "Voting is Your Responsibility," on Children of Selma. *Who Will Speak for the Children?* CD, Cambridge, Mass.: Rounder Records, 1988.

Kate Lyman teaches 2nd and 3rd grade in Madison, Wis. Several of her articles appear in the books [*Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vols. One and Two*](#), and [*Rethinking Early Childhood Education*](#). Student names have been changed.

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